CLOSING

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three Cheapo Depots in Weatherford, Granbury and Brownwood, all of which will remain open.

The owners said they have invited all six of their full-time or near-full-time employees to continue to work for them at their Weatherford store.

While store manager Joyce Simmons, who started working at the store in March 1993, two months after it opened, said she likely would accept the offer and go to Weatherford, some employees probably cannot make the drive, she added.

"I love the store here, love the people here and I really hate to leave," Simmons said.

Quick to say he is not criticizing Wal-Mart, Glen Guthrie said he expects the Supercenter to siphon business from other retailers in the area, causing them to shutter.

"With the 9,000-pound gorilla that is building across the street, we don't want to get washed out by the tidal wave that is going to remove the other small businesses in that area," he said, equating Wal-Mart with a large ape. "They've got a hammerlock on these little towns and there is nobody else that can ... compete with them.

"I don't know how Brookshire's or how David's will compete with them."

Mineral Wells City Manager Lance Howerton said he is not sure how the new Wal-Mart will affect smaller businesses.

"The only thing we can say as a fact is that there will be additional competition," Howerton said, adding that the new competition only would be in grocery retail because the Supercenter, unlike the existing Wal-Mart, will sell food products, in addition to general merchandise. "But how that competition ultimately resolves itself, I'm not in a position to predict."

The city manager said general merchandise retail competition, which is what Cheapo Depot currently faces with its next-door neighbor, Wal-Mart, will not change materially.

Howerton said in city meetings and otherwise he has heard mostly positive comments and a few negative assertions about the incoming Wal-Mart Supercenter.

While shopping in Cheapo Depot Thursday afternoon, Christina and Virginia Pritchett were eager to talk about Wal-Mart, Cheapo Depot and Mineral Wells.

"Wal-Mart has the right to be everywhere they want to be, but I am sick and tired of Wal-Mart taking over everything because you see stuff in here that you wouldn't see in Wal-Mart," Virginia said, admitting, however, that, "We are always in Wal-Mart."

Calling Cheapo Depot "neat," Virginia's mother, Christine, said shoppers "are so use to Wal-Mart that they overlook everything else."

Both Prtichetts agreed that the economy of the city likely played large part in the Cheapo Depot departure decision.

"This town is not going anywhere," Christine said. "It's not growing," her daughter added.

For Howerton, every lost business is unfortunate.

"We certainly hate to see any of our businesses close," the city manager said. "I think that that is the nature of business.

"In the competitive marketplace we find ourselves in, that's going to happen."